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ABSTRACT

Graduate students at Montclair State College (New Jersey) were given the option of writing a journal article for publication in lieu of composing a standard term paper. The students were instructed to write essays, not research-focused papers, since the requirements for the latter were too time-consuming and perhaps beyond students' level of experience. They were allowed to submit their articles to the journal of their choice, as long as they observed the journal's editorial requirements; protocol for submitting manuscripts was discussed in class. A professional writer spoke to the students about the review process and prepared them for the possibility of rejection by sharing with them his own experiences with failure. At the same time, the class was reminded that a rejection was not to be considered a failure, since editors often provided some instructive comments or reasons for the rejection. Further, students were also assured that the articles would be graded on the same basis as traditional term papers had been. In spite of initial student resistance, the article option proved extremely successful; student papers have been published in local, regional, and national publications, and, more importantly, students' confidence in their writing ability has soared. (AEW)

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ACTIVE LEARNING: THE EQUILIBRIUM BETWEEN STUDENT WRITING AND CRITICAL THINKING

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ACTIVE LEARNING: THE EQUILIBRIUM BETWEEN STUDENT WRITING AND CRITICAL THINKING

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If it is true that American society is in the process of transformation from an industrial to an informational society, then "excellence in education" (however it be defined) is more central to this change than ever before. With rare exception, educational institutions only achieve excellence when they are committed to excellence and use all possible means--persuasion, cajoling, insisting, or outright demanding--to achieve excellence in educational programs. Beyond doubt, the emerging demands of an informational society and those of students for market-centered skills are in this particular context more compatible than ever before. The changing nature of the work place and the demands for new skills and talent provide the opportunity to move beyond the rhetoric and reinvigorate our teaching efforts at performance levels appropriate to excellence in teaching demanded of a changing society and today's students. In the long run, nothing less than a redefinition of our commitment to teaching and a revision of expectations in learning outcomes will liberate us from public criticism of higher education. It is true, of course, no institution of higher learning has ever fully succeeded in achieving the high expectations a free society imposes on them. But only in a free society can institutions of higher education address themselves to these demanding tasks. In this context, no challenge is more important than the search for a new and fuller meaning to the idea of excellence in education. This task is all the more challenging because the answer will be found less in what we say than in what we do. It will be found partly on the scale of our achievements,

but even more importantly, in the finished product.

This paper describes our program aimed toward giving concrete meaning to "excellence in teaching." We focused our efforts in nourishing student potentials in writing competency as market-centered skills.

Although writing is a necessary skill, whatever one's occupation, professional writing is not always a part of academic training; but with rising societal expectations and the increasing prominence of information processing as the new technology, there are signs that this position is changing. One important and influential sign is the findings and recommendations of the 1983 National Study on Education by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. Among other things, this report stated, "Writing is the most important and neglected skill in school," and went on to suggest that writing should be taught across the curriculum.

Genesis of the Project

This project began in 1975 as a response to the indistinguishable quality of graduate student term papers. We perceived the quality of student papers as unacceptable and symptomatic of a universal disdain for traditional term papers, and/or lack of appreciation of the importance of writing skills, in an environment that is highly dependent on print information and other forms of sophisticated communication. The purpose of this effort was the following: to enable students to perceive a higher value for writing proficiency by making writing of publishable quality a singular learning outcome, they could appreciate, as a measure of genuine individual accomplishment. The objective was simple and straightforward. We sought to develop individual capacities and to inspire creative thinking, while at the same time widening and deepening realization of these potentials. In order to mount the project, we had to find a rationale and method or mode of access to the untapped resources, and imagination of students,

enabling them to fulfill their promise as students and future contributors to society.

Focusing on the inextricable connection between the real world and academe, we rationalize that writing skills could be developed if we linked such efforts to the idea that, 1) contributing to the extant literature from which one has received his/her academic training is a professional obligation and responsibility, and 2) that since every academically trained person should at some point in their career have something important to say about their work experience, cultivation of this attitude and development of skills in effective writing should be a teaching goal in graduate school.

Lack of Writing Proficiency Harms the Discipline

Any individual preparing for a vocation or career, be it industry, business, government or the professions, needs to understand that contributing to the existing knowledge base is a powerful stimulant for advancing knowledge for either basic or applied goals. No discipline can hope to retain its credibility if material for its relevancy and growth is absent. If students are poorly prepared for the writing that will be required of them, they will be sorely handicapped in discharging their indebtedness and obligation to their discipline. They will have failed (or is it the professor who has failed) to develop the importance of writing. And as prospective members of a profession with a stake in and a responsibility to question, challenge or add to the already discovered body of knowledge, they will be ill-prepared to be effective communicators. And because of our conviction that every professional person should at some juncture in time have something of importance, evolving out of their field of practice to share with their colleagues, development of the mental processes for effective writing is one of the most important measurable outcomes of professional training.

Publication an Option

The program was successful, in part, because it was made clear to the students that writing papers for publication was an option. We frankly acknowledged with no disrespect to the class the realization that probably most of them lacked the requisite skills for publication. We insisted, however, they were capable of writing good, short and simple declarative sentences expressing an idea. And it was this potential that was to be exploited with creative and imaginative thinking. Originality was stressed as a demonstration of the individual's capacity to think through ideas and conceptualize them in a meaningful frame of reference. In orienting the students to the assignment, they were cautioned, serious writing is always preceded by a search of the extant literature to discover if what one has to say is truly a contribution to the literature. Since the object of written work is to inform, we stress students should know what others before them have said about the same subject. To ignore past contributions, we admonished, is to impair the scholarship of their efforts. Lesson-wise, the students were apprised of the following: when a person says, "I know what I mean, but can't express it," the individual most likely does not know what he/she means. The individual still has some thinking to do. As the individual begins to pull his/her thoughts together, especially by learning to write in short, simple declarative sentences, the person will clarify his/her own ideas and, for some individuals, this is an excellent method for developing understanding of subject organization.

We made clear in the orientation, which was usually the initial class meeting, our strong belief that the development of attitudes and understanding of the importance of writing proficiency cannot be left to chance. We further believed that in future employment, their written work will be judged primarily on its contents; that is, on the value or quality of the information and ideas

it expresses; that careful organization and clear, concise expression of content would be essential if the intended reader is to grasp the full meaning. Thus, the mental processes on which written expressions of ideas depend were reviewed. These included: 1) Generalizations: pulling together the common elements that relate specific examples, ideas or instances to one another; 2) Inferences: extracting the meanings that are implied but not stated explicitly; reading between the lines; 3) Analysis: examining parts of the whole, such as causes, effects and processes; 4) Synthesis: developing ideas into new relationships or contexts: creating, organizing the parts as in a puzzle; 5) Evaluation: making judgments according to a criterion: is it concise, readable, organized.

Our message to students emphasized that to be marketable and successful in today's world, they will need to experience, if only from a market-centered perspective, the rigors of critical thinking. This means: 1) developing the capacity to apply to new context the knowledge gained from classroom learning, readings, life experiences and library research; 2) developing the ability to draw conclusions, as opposed to simply restating or summarizing the works of others; 3) being able to state a thesis clearly and support same with reasoning and evidence; 4) being able to organize the parts of a paper in an orderly sequence, governed by a controlling purpose that is clear to the writer, with paragraphs and subsections containing their own internal organization; and 5) being able to adapt what one writes to the needs and expectations of the intended audience, whether it is one's peers, other scholars in one's discipline, or the general public.

Overcoming Student Resistance

At the outset, we recognized students will have various needs and

abilities regarding this assignment: 1) those students who have the ability to write competently but who might need encouragement to write for publication; 2) those students who lack the intrinsic drive and self-confidence and might therefore require some market-force persuasion, reassurance and ego support; and 3) those students who for a variety of reasons would opt for the traditional term paper requirement. We were convinced, therefore, that students would need to be inspired, challenged or nudged into writing a mature and publishable paper with all the confidence that makes it possible. As an aside, I would point out that published papers as learning outcomes are significant indices of teaching effectiveness.

With respect to students' probable reaction, we anticipated initial resistance if not outright dismissal of the challenge to compose articles for professional journals. Our strategy in minimizing or disarming their arguments took the following approach, which proved to be effective.

1. Students were initially oriented on their soon-to-be professional status with all the "rights, privileges and immunities thereunto appertaining," including the obligation in contributing to the literature of their respective discipline. It was made clear that this is a responsibility all members of a profession assume: that only as the existing body of knowledge undergoes constant review and revision, as new ideas and experience emerge from practice, can the discipline maintain its usefulness and relevancy to the work place.

2. The advantages and benefits of serious writing were discussed in great detail. We noted, for example, the immense pride in seeing one's paper published in important journals alongside those of well-known scholars; the prestige and status accruing therefrom; its value factor in enhancing one's resume; the demonstration of one's ability to pursue doctoral studies. (Several of my writer-students have gone on to earn doctorates.) Lastly, we

stressed the equally serious commitment to writing as a significant measure or component of professional leadership. Publication of one's views, we observed, demonstrates ability to articulate issues, which is an important index of leadership.

3. For the timid, unsure student, our strategy involved encouraging them to "test the waters" by writing an "op-ed" piece, a short newspaper article or letter to the editor of their local newspaper or to a news journal (e.g., Time, Newsweek, U.S. News and World Report) in response to a news article. This approach had a two-fold purpose: 1) as a result of their "article," the student should feel more self-confidence, more comfortable with the ensuing demands of a larger, more substantive paper, and the rigors of serious writing; and 2) the student would be encouraged to use the published statement as the basis for a more fully developed paper with the usual references, footnotes and bibliography. It should be noted, several students have found this prescription helpful as a starter, perhaps, because it enabled them to sharpen their understanding of short, concise articles that communicate ideas. As a tool it was most effective.

4. Since lectures are the predominant method of instruction, and it is generally recognized that the educational yield from lectures is generally low, we sought to increase the yield by granting students a wide latitude in topic selection, including topics indirectly related to course content. Factors such as students' age, maturity, years of experience, discipline (my students represent a variety of fields, e.g., teaching, health professions, business and social welfare) and topic interest had to be considered, given the heterogeneous makeup of the class and the unusual requirements imposed on them. In general, we sought to strike a dynamically important note of inquisitiveness by calling to students' attention (especially those with years of professional

experience) the yet unsolved problems and issues in their field and encouraging them to re-examine the fundamental tenets of his/her discipline.

In this connection, the clinical value of this approach was that it made more palpable our assertion that as professionals already toiling in the "vineyards," there is much to be harvested in conceptual and theoretical questions culled from "hands-on" experiences. This strategy also helped in the breakdown of powerful anxieties and/or frozen attitudes. More importantly, it helped to persuade those students wavering in their choice between a term paper or a more substantial paper for publication. As a further inducement and source of support, we established a working relationship with the college writing workshop, a remedial program sponsored by the English Department for assisting students with writing problems.

Essay-Type Articles Stressed

The students were instructed to write essays and not research-focused papers, the requirements of which we considered too time-consuming and perhaps outside the individual's level of experience. They were advised to examine the college library's holding of journals and periodicals and select a journal they felt comfortable with for submission of their manuscript. They were further instructed to comply with journal's editorial requirement and not to follow the traditional term paper organization and style. We discussed protocol for submitting manuscripts, and the writer using his experience as a consulting editor to a journal, the juried/review process was explained as was the appropriate information for the cover letter. The students were also forewarned of possible rejection and the psychological let-down ensuing therefrom. But we assured the class that the best of authors have experienced editorial rejection, and the writer candidly shared with them his personal experiences with failure. At the same time, we reminded the students that a rejection was not per se a

failure but an object lesson in writing, since it is a common practice for the editor to offer some instructive comments or reasons for the rejection. In some instances, we reminded the class, rewriting the paper with the editor's comments or suggestions in mind, and resubmitting it can often result in its acceptance.

Finally, the class was assured their paper would be graded on the same basis as a term paper. This statement was important lest those students opting for the traditional term paper perceive themselves in a disadvantaged position at grade time.

As an aside, whenever a student sought independent study, we found this an excellent opportunity to tout serious writing. While the student was allowed to fashion his/her own course of study, invariably we would convince the student that a paper of publishable quality should be one outcome of independent study.

Conclusion and Summary

The effort to improve the writing skills of students was in large part a function of the permissiveness of the assignment and teacher-student relationship. Perhaps, it is fair to observe, given the usual anxieties associated with term papers, in this instance, the student had the opportunity for choice-making and settled for the option (or anxiety) perceived as less menacing over the other anxiety which was seen as more threatening.

The resulting choice of the students has clearly the character of professionalism as the evidential material suggests. Student papers have been published in local, regional, and national publications including Adult Leadership, Journal of International Association of Pupil Personnel Worker, Today's Education, The Clearing House, Counseling and Values, The Guidance Clinic, Cimmaron Review, The Independent School Bulletin, Adult Education, Teacher

Paper, School Board Notes, School Leader, NJEA Review, Journal of Business, NAD Broadcaster, Childhood Education, Secaucus Home News, EAP Digest and Journal of Health Education.

It should be apparent, from the above, the correctness of the decision to permit a wide latitude in subject choice. Finally, we would reiterate, writing for publication was clearly an option. While there was initial resistance student evaluations at semester's end indicated a worthwhile experience. One other unanticipated but welcome outcome was students' new-found respect for published articles. Not only had these students learned to write proficiently, and in the process raised their self-confidence, but they also learned that to write is learning to think. And, perhaps, the most striking instance of success in this program was the affirmation of students to continue writing for publication in other courses in lieu of term papers. This was true even for those students whose papers were not accepted for publication. This unique teaching approach has the potential for a new model in student learning outcomes. As the results demonstrate, student publications, as a measure of cognitive learning experiences, are an attractive alternative to the traditional term paper. One further thought needs to be shared. Obviously, a number of factors, known and unknown, contributed to the success of the program. One factor that stands out is the following: Students find credibility in the writer's efforts, when they know that he has published. As a strategy, I would distribute copies of my articles as well as those published by former students. Each year, I would try to publish one or two articles so that my efforts would represent for students a model, a standard of sorts for much needed encouragement and support. Thus students recognized I would not demand from them what I am not prepared to demand of myself. I am certain this has been an important factor in my success to date.